"Witch-oil": Subversive Female Mentors in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*

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Abstract

Philip Pullman's fantasy trilogy *His Dark Materials* follows Lyra Belacqua's journey across different worlds, where she meets a series of adult figures who act as her guides and mentors – and also as tormentors and pursuers. This paper will focus on two of the women who teach and nurture Lyra: Serafina Pekkala, a witch, but a benign figure; and Marisa Coulter, an intelligent, glamorous woman who turns out to be her mother, and one of the main villains. In my view – from a Gender Studies perspective –, Serafina and Coulter offer positive examples of the representation of women in fantasy literature, which their role as mentors for the protagonist, with all their differences, prove. Their memorable personalities go beyond stereotypes, and they are characters with agency and believable motives. The two characters will be analysed on their own, exploring the cultural tradition they seem to be built upon; and in comparison, studying their role as mentors of a younger woman.

I. Introduction

Philip Pullman's trilogy *His Dark Materials*, published between 1995 and 2000, tells the story of twelve-year-old Lyra Belacqua, growing up in a slightly different Oxford to our own. Her adventures across parallel universes bring her to meet a wide array of adult characters that help or pursue her, or both. Most academic work on this trilogy has studied its religious and philosophical aspects, since its main themes are the search for truth and the questioning of authority: the trilogy has been controversial because of its overt critique of religious institutions. The referential richness of the text is one of its strengths, and it signals the importance of paying attention to the archetypical nature of its characters.

This paper aims to analyse how the trilogy's subversive potential is extended to its portrayal of female characters. The focus will be on two of Lyra's mentors: Marisa Coulter, the heroine's mother and one of the main villains; and Serafina Pekkala, a witch but also a protector. The goal is not to debate whether *His Dark Materials* or its characters *are* feminist, but rather to see if they hold up to a particular feminist reading; that is, if these women are portrayed as complex, with their own agency and development. In my view, Mrs. Coulter and Serafina are positive examples of the representation of women in fantasy literature; they subvert stereotypes and change the heroine's views on femininity for the better. For reasons of length, the character of Mary Malone will not be analysed, although she is also a mentor figure and very relevant to Lyra's development.

The first section of the paper will clarify the terms used, and study *His Dark Materials*' place in the genre of children's fantasy and its relationship with previous texts. In the second and third parts we will analyse Mrs. Coulter and Serafina Pekkala

on their own, moving on to a Gender Studies perspective, exploring the stereotypes they seem to be an answer to – the Mother and the Witch, respectively. In the fourth part, the women's role in Lyra's growth will be studied; their interactions will be taken into account, and we will see how they shape the world around them.

II. *His Dark Materials* as Children's Fantasy

Before an analysis of the characters of Mrs. Coulter and Serafina Pekkala is attempted, the terms that will be used must be clarified. Both 'the Mother' and 'the Witch' are recurrent characters of Western fairy tales[1], and all audiences are presumed to be familiar with them, since they reflect a social and historical reality – children and adults alike will be aware of what mothers and witches are as a result of their widespread presence in cultural works. Those characters answer to expectations about women; when the reader is faced with a fictional mother, they will bear in mind not only their own experience with mothers, but also the cultural construct of 'motherhood'.

As literary constructs, the Witch and the Mother can be discussed as *archetypes*, characters with certain characteristics and functions in the story that can be found across cultures; or as *stereotypes*, that is, fixed, single images that represent a whole collective – often in a negative way – and are repeated in stories, jokes, and mental projections. Lois Rauch Gibson clarifies: "Archetypes provide foundations to build on and allow endless variety; stereotypes label and limit by assuming all members of a group share similar traits" (1988: 177). A character should not be dismissed because it is built upon an archetype, as they often are in the fantasy genre: archetypes are flexible, open to multiple readings, and can be used to subvert expectations about gender roles.

[1] The Mother is a central figure in "Rumpelstiltskin" and "Snow-White and Rose-Red", while the Witch is the main antagonist of "Hansel and Gretel" or "Rapunzel", where she expresses a desire to be a mother as well.

Stereotypes, on the other hand, result in flat, repetitive characters, have no subversive potential beyond satire, and are offensive and alienating at their worst. Following Greimas' actantial model, stereotypical characters can be *actants* – conceptual categories, like 'the Hero' or 'the Giver' –, since they only have to fulfil a function in the plot, but they cannot be *actors*, since they show no individuality or realism (Attebery 2012: 83). It must be taken into account that the reader can find an archetype and take it to heart, turning it into a new stereotype, effectively wasting its potential. Diane Purkiss found that feminist thought which based its theory in analysing images of women "can be annihilatingly prescriptive" (1996: 33) – what is empowering or subversive is, after all, quite subjective.

His Dark Materials belongs to the fantasy genre, which has been stated to be a product of modernity, while fairy tales are archaic; the reader will feel *displaced* from the latter, while the first will be more familiar and realistic (Nikolajeva 2003: 138); all the same, fantasy has "inherited the fairy-tale system of characters" (140) and it can be extracted from that that characters from both genres can be analysed in similar ways. Nikolajeva herself discusses Pullman's trilogy, claiming that in his works "good and evil change places easily, and every concept, every belief, is relative. This is of course totally impossible in fairy tales with their clear-cut and unequivocal ethical categories" (145). This relativism, together with the refreshing use of archetypes, brings Pullman close to the "fractured" fairy tale, a genre in which "the authority of tradition and of familiar story conventions are challenged" (Stephens 2010: 104). The critic, in fact, calls this 'iconoclasm', a label that has been often attached to Pullman himself.

The trilogy, then, deliberately plays with fairy tale conventions in its building of archetypical fantasy characters and themes. Moreover, it sources canonical works as obvious intertexts. In *The Subtle Knife*, Mary Malone reflects on John Keats's "negative

capability", while many critics have pointed out the influence of Blake in Pullman's approach to childish innocence. More importantly, the entire trilogy can be read as a retelling of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* since it also explains the Fall of humankind and has a sympathetic Lucifer figure in Lyra's father, Lord Asriel. Furthermore, lines from the 17th Century poem are used as an introduction to the first book. As it is, Pullman's plot clearly answers to previous literary tradition – why should his characters not be understood to be doing the same?

The very act of *telling* – and thus *retelling* – stories is a main theme throughout the novels. The narrator constantly points out that Lyra's main strength is her ability as a liar and storyteller. In *The Amber Spyglass*, the harpies free the dead in exchange for true stories. A few chapters later, a ghost advices Mary Malone – the scientist who will tempt the protagonists into saving the 'particles of consciousness' – to "tell them stories", which inspires her to share her life experience with Lyra and Will, the trilogy's other lead. It has been said that:

> Not only do these heroines [including Lyra] resist being shaped by narrative causality, they teach their readers to resist as well. In so doing, however, they turn story-making into a religious act, rejecting fundamentalism but also (ironically) revitalizing the very traditions, rituals, and/or beliefs that their actions might seem to undermine. (Gruner 2011: 277-278)

Telling stories becomes ritualistic as well as a sign of strength; it swaps ancient traditions for new ones. Both the content and the form of the trilogy, then, reflect the idea that its characters are meant to come from old genre – and gender – archetypes while at the same time being subversive and opening new paths. This is reinforced by setting up the plot so that the failure to do that would result in the end of human consciousness and cultural development.

Pullman's rejection of stereotypes is complex, and it is shown through dialogue, his characters' actions, and their effect on the plot. In a less explicit way, he uses themes

and traits that traditionally mark a stereotype in a different character, which by fairy tale conventions should not have them at all; that is, the Mother has aspects of the Evil Stepmother; the Witch could be the Fairy Godmother. In *His Dark Materials*, adult women are not divided into saintly mothers and villainous, children-kidnapping witches: the reader's expectations are reversed.

Even if it is agreed that the characters in *His Dark Materials* can be analysed as rejected stereotypes from fairy tales, we must bear in mind that the trilogy is meant for older children. Children's literature has its own set of conventions which must be taken into account. Pullman's narrator fits the statement that "most narrators of children's literature tend to be reassuring, friendly adult voices" (Llompart 2014: 28-29). The narrator not only tells the story, but also *explains* its content. It "describes more than the child protagonist perceives" (205), and switches perspectives when the protagonists are not present. It is aware that it is more knowledgeable than its reader, and when it comes to making a moral point, it does so more than once. This can be seen in the trilogy's insistence on (re-)telling stories: "fantasy stories should not be 'trivial', but they should be at the service of knowledge and say something about the 'real' world" (210).

Pullman's characters also reflect contemporary children's fantasy literature conventions. Nikolajeva writes that:

> Not only protagonists, but also supporting characters in postmodern fantasy have lost the clear-cut distinction between good and evil. Since such characters often perform the roles of parental substitutes, their ambiguity undermines the sense of security that young protagonists normally receive from such figures. (2003:147-148)

In this sense, Mrs. Coulter and Serafina Pekkala are not unconventional. The first is a mostly absent mother, like the ones in *Matilda* (Roald Dahl, 1988), *Harry Potter* (J. K. Rowling 1997-2007) or *Molly Moon* (Georgia Byng, 2004-2012). For different reasons, the characters in these books have substitute parental figures – as Serafina's case. In my

view, considering *His Dark Materials* as a children's fantasy series that is aware of its own status in the genre, Mrs. Coulter and Serafina Pekkala are subversive *only* in their presentation of gender roles.

III. Deceiving the Authority: Marisa Coulter as a Subversive Mother

There are two traits of the stereotypical Mother that are remarkable from a Gender Studies perspective. The first is the devotion to her children, and it seems to draw from the idea that motherhood is a woman's natural role. Western thought, from Eve being cursed to give birth in pain and Mary at the foot of the cross in the Bible to Illustration treatises like Rousseau's - which prescribe a "regime of total attention to the child from an early age" (Kaplan 2013: 20) – is steeped with the assumption that a good mother is all-caring and willing to forsake her own interests to that of her children.

The characters in *His Dark Materials* live in a world not very different from ours; their religious discourse is close to Catholicism, since in its alternative chronology there has not been a Reformation. It is not said whether there has been an Illustration, but the Church and the State do not seem to be separate. All in all, the characters show an acceptance of the idea of the devoted mother, which, like in our world, is tied to the ideal nuclear family. Amelia Rutledge, in her study of parental figures in the trilogy, writes that; "for most of *Northern Lights*, Lyra remains subject to the 'family romance' (that she, Asriel and Coulter will live together as a family) she constructs for herself and her parents" (Rutledge 2008: 125). The protagonist, then, clings to the hope of a devoted family – interestingly, not only a mother – as escapism, giving it a fairy tale quality.

This idealised, even sugary aspect of the stereotype is deliberately invoked by Mrs. Coulter herself to her benefit. She demands information about Lyra while crying; "My

child, my own child, conceived in sin and born in shame, but my child nonetheless…" (Pullman 1997: 33), thus using the Church's rhetoric of purity and sin to gain their sympathy, and pretending a care that she does not feel yet. In another occasion, as Rutledge points out:

> Coulter, defending her abduction of Lyra, mistakenly invokes Will's mother as an example of a protector. Coulter's blandishments cannot stand against the truth of Will's own experiences; a mother's care has not been an option for him for a long time. (2008: 126)

The second stereotypical aspect that must be reflected upon is that of the Mother as a gender role model. As Rousseau might remind us, a mother ought to give a basic education for her children, regardless of their gender. Nevertheless, we must focus on the Mother's influence in shaping other women in her own image. It seems that a girl's first model of a woman would be her mother, especially in the very traditionally Western and much idealised circumstances that this mother is present, part of a heterosexual nuclear family, willing and able to give an education, and fitting the standard of womanly virtues herself. Such a mother, then, would be a *feminising* force on her daughter, providing the expected gender role model – in the sense of what the society she is part of understands as *feminine*, and what she herself understands as such, combining social and personal values.

Indeed, "Mrs Coulter instructs [Lyra] in geography, mathematics, and survival skills (such as not to eat bear liver), as well as in the subtler arts of femininity" (Gruner 2009: 230). It is remarkable that all the explorers that appear in the trilogy, with the exception of Mrs. Coulter, are men. Therefore, she passes on traditionally feminine skills such as make-up and non-offensive denial (Pullman 1995: 77), which the author very clearly classifies as female-only, but also academic knowledge that is mostly reserved to men. Mrs. Coulter, then, fits the stereotype in that she is a gender role model, but she is not

limited to that – she does not break the mould, but expands it by introducing Lyra to areas most women in Pullman's universe do not have access to.

This traditional femininity – that of prettiness and charm, strategies that Lyra lacks but would be useful in the patriarchal structures her mother inhabits – does not sit well with Lyra in the long run and the reader is meant to see it as merely as a distraction to Lyra's true destiny:

> [Mrs. Coulter] not only wants to keep children innocent forever by preventing Dust from settling on them, but also attempts to feminize tomboyish Lyra (…) Indeed, in Pullman's trilogy, femininity is a repressive force (…) it is mostly stereotypical femininity that is repressive. (Llompart 2014: 236-237)

Therefore, if the all-caring mother is rejected as mere fantasy – in the negative sense of the word – the mother as a passer of the torch of traditional femininity is portrayed as something that can even be damaging. Mrs. Coulter's more womanly teachings are dismissed as ultimately useless – at least for Lyra, since they still work for Coulter herself. These two traits of the stereotype of the Mother, then, appear in *His Dark Materials* but in a negative light, setting up Mrs. Coulter's subversive potential.

Marisa Coulter is, indeed, Lyra's mother. However, at the moment of her introduction this fact is a secret, and Lyra only perceives her as a sophisticated woman, a would-be mentor that puts all the others to shame. She is shown to be an expert social climber, a fact that is remarked by other characters:

> Your mother's always been ambitious for power. At first she tried to get it in the normal way, through marriage, but that didn't work, as I think you've heard. So she had to turn to the Church. Naturally she couldn't take the route a man could have taken – priesthood and so on – it had to be unorthodox; she had to set up her own order, her own channels of influence, and work through that. It was a good move to specialize in Dust. Everyone was frightened of it. (Pullman 1995: 337)

As a woman, her strategies are limited; she is aware of the fixed roles for her gender that her Church promotes, and comments on them with cutting irony; "You will have to speak more plainly than that (…) You forget I am a woman, Your Eminence, and thus

not so subtle as a prince of the Church" (Pullman 1997: 31). She does not struggle to fit in the existing structures, but rather creates her own – the Oblation Board –, becoming "as powerful in her way as Lord Asriel was in his" (1995: 117). Her power is not only institutional, but also violent: she commands armies and inspires "all the fear in [Lyra's] nature" (1995: 241). Mrs. Coulter is even capable of dismissing the soul-sucking Spectres, since:

> They know I can give them more nourishment if they let me live than if they consume me. I can lead them to all the victims their phantom hearts desire. As soon as you described them to me, I knew I could dominate them, and so it turns out. And a whole world trembles in the power of these pallid things! (Pullman 1997: 279)

She is also physically "beautiful", "passionate" and "clever (…) a Scholar, even" (1995: 112). Her cleverness, like her daughter's, is often used to deceive; Lyra herself states that "she'd lie even if it made things worse for herself, because she just loves lying too much to stop" (2000: 125). It is commented that she is not well-born, and it might be that, added to her limitations as a woman, that drive her to desperately cling to and expand what power she has.

Nevertheless, all her beauty and passion are exposed in their dark side in her daemon, that is, the "visual representation of one's inner essence, personality, or emotions" (Greenwell 2010: 103). Her daemon, a monkey, is as luxurious in his golden fur as she is in her alluring appearance, but he is always described in negative terms: "a small furry golden hand with black fingernails, and then a face – a nightmare face" (Pullman 1997: 183). He is greedy and violent, even when Mrs. Coulter pretends to be otherwise. He has no regard for privacy and grabs what he wants, which Rutledge links to Mrs. Coulter's narcissism: "In Marisa Coulter, whose unstable allegiances and *habitus* of deceit mimic the labile nature of an immature daemon, several categories of destructive parent converge (…) in a hopelessly confused protectiveness – or possessiveness"

(2008: 123). The daemon's name is never revealed, and he never speaks in front of other characters: Mrs. Coulter's soul is kept voluntarily silenced, but its actions and gestures show her as she is. Will Parry is fascinated by the woman, but "the addition to the scene of the daemon-as-visual-text allows him to settle the debate" (Greenwell 2010: 109), agreeing with Lyra in that Mrs. Coulter is ultimately repulsive.

Mrs. Coulter will go to any length to keep control over a situation; in a fight with Lyra, who up to this point has only had positive thoughts about her, Mrs. Coulter becomes a suddenly terrifying, inhuman presence, "seem[ing] to be charged with some kind of anbaric [electric] force" (Pullman 1995: 84). The devotion that is expected of a mother is simply not there at first, as she tells Lord Asriel to "take her and be welcome. She's more yours than mine" (1995: 356). Nonetheless, as the story develops she grows protective to the point of possessiveness. She keeps her daughter captive and drugged, but at the same time she gently combs her hair (2000: 8).

It is interesting to consider how Lyra perceives Mrs. Coulter: "Whereas Lord Asriel was now 'father', Mrs. Coulter was never 'mother'. The reason for that was Mrs. Coulter's daemon, the golden monkey, who had filled Pantalaimon with a powerful loathing" (Pullman 1995: 209) – Lyra's very soul rejects her as a potential source of love, and she is aware of "the misuse of cleverness and the hollowness within the glamour of sophistication" (Rutledge 2008: 131). Lyra later remembers their time together as her captive; "I really felt she was loving me and looking after me (…) And I remember waking up once or twice and she was holding me in her arms" (Pullman 2000: 163), but it is implied that she is projecting her idea of what a mother should be and do onto the real Mrs. Coulter: "I *do* remember that, I'm sure… That's what I'd do in her place, if I had a child". Indeed, the line between genuine care for Lyra as a daughter and care for Lyra as a tool to secure a position in a new order is blurred.

Mrs. Coulter does not only go against stereotypical aspects of the mother; she also shows some traits of the femme fatale and the witch. She seems "almost to be a new sex altogether, one with dangerous powers and qualities such as elegance, charm, and grace" (Pullman 1995: 75). She seems to charm everyone, which makes her task of kidnapping vulnerable children all that easier, since they "come to [her] willingly" (88). Moreover, her status as a single woman reinforces her projection of trustworthiness on her victims. The destructive potential of her allure comes up in different occasions; her nature is described as "as close to that of a scorpion as [Lord Roke] had ever encountered, and he was well aware of the power in the sting her could detect under her gentle tone" (Pullman 2000: 182).

Mrs. Coulter and her fellow child-captors are nicknamed 'Gobblers'; devouring children is a traditional trait of the witch, growing out of "the medieval stereotype of cannibalistic heretics" (Herzig 2010: 70). She offers chocolate to Tony Makarios, who later dies after being severed from his daemon by Coulter's followers – this reminds the reader of tales like Hansel and Gretel, in which the initially considerate woman "is a devourer, not a substitute mother but an antimother" (Purkiss 1996: 278), or that of Black Annis, in which "the witch who offered food also symbolically assumed the role of the child-victim's mother" (279). Witchcraft studies associate "literacy with insects, or demonic obsession with swallowing flies" (Herzig 2010: 73); Mrs. Coulter uses a mechanic fly to track and harm her daughter. Mrs. Coulter also has black hair, a colour that in Western fairy tales "connotes enchantment as well as death (…) Enchantment is something like reversible death, and death itself appears in tones of enchantment" (Vaz da Silva 2007: 247). In *The Amber Spyglass*, a young girl witnesses Mrs. Coulter taking a lock of Lyra's hair while she keeps her drugged – under a 'sleeping enchantment' – and recognizes Mrs. Coulter's act as one of witchcraft. While not actually practising

magic, Mrs. Coulter's appearance and the motifs of some of her scenes (hair, flies, profound sleep, food as lure) make her fit the stereotype of the witch to some extent. Interestingly enough, Ma Costa, a 'gyptian' woman who cares for Lyra, tells her: "You got witch oil in your soul. Deceptive, that's what you are, child" (Pullman 1995: 104). The link to witchcraft – especially to the crafty use of language – seems to be a shared trait between mother and daughter.

Mrs. Coulter, with her silenced daemon, allows the reader little insight into her thoughts or motivations. Lord Asriel, arguably the person that knows her best, states that "[her] fire's been quenched in a drizzle of sentimental piety" (Pullman 2000: 176), while she regrets that their relationship was not more conventional; "we should have married (…) and brought her up ourselves" (337). Nonetheless, it is not until her final appearance that her nature is described in unambiguous terms. There is a brief moment in which the angel Metatron describes what he sees in her nature:

> Corruption and envy and lust for power. Cruelty and coldness. A vicious, probing curiosity. Pure, poisonous, toxic malice. You have never from your earliest years shown a shred of compassion or sympathy or kindness without calculating how it would return to your advantage. (…) You are a cesspit of moral filth. (2000: 353)

At this, Mrs. Coulter feels "a little gush of triumph": she has been able to hide her love for Lyra, and thus can seduce and kill Metatron, redeeming herself in the reader's eyes. As Nikolajeva considers:

> It is hard to understand her motivation, and her ultimate reformation, ostensibly driven by her sudden maternal instincts, is psychologically implausible. However, witnessing her martyr's death for Lyra's sake, most readers will be convinced. Human nature is enigmatic and inconsistent, and the character of Mrs. Coulter is a good illustration. A fairy-tale character cannot possibly go through a similar transformation; an evil stepmother cannot be reformed. (2003: 148)

She is not devoted, or an accepted gender role model, but her very last appearance, as she throws herself into the abyss, is as "Lyra's mother" (Pullman 2000:362).

Mrs. Coulter is a force of nature, a survivor, who excels at taking care of herself; at the same time, she is an oppressing force for those around her, and does not doubt in hurting children for her own benefit; she views others as "extensions of [her] own will" (Rutledge 2008: 122). She is kept outside conventional structures of power, but it only makes her more ruthless. By making Marisa Coulter an ambiguous character, capable of ethically damnable actions but also of loving her daughter and sacrificing herself for a new, free world, Pullman subverts simplistic stereotypes of motherhood. She has her own goals and development; when she and Lord Asriel act on Lyra's behalf, "they seem more energized by her cause than by her status as their daughter". This seems to mirror the author's critique of tyrannical authority and unquestioned tradition.

IV. The Wicked Hag and the Joyful Goddess: Serafina Pekkala as a Contemporary Witch

The stereotypical Witch seems to be more complex than the Mother. It is found in many cultures with variations; this paper will focus on the Western European version. Moreover, in recent decades the fixed image seems to have split in two: there is the negative figure of a wicked old hag, and the revisionist yet still limiting image of a woman who draws her strength from nature. The Witch crosses the threshold between fiction and reality: the truth of her powers depends on the religious beliefs of the viewer. Throughout this paper, they will be considered a purely fictional construction. Nevertheless, the fiction of the Witch has been projected onto real women, and their possible medical knowledge or ability to psychologically help or harm their community will not be denied. Just like the Mother, the Witch articulates particular aspects of the ideology of their society – beliefs about nature, the occult, womanhood, margins, outsiders – only its grounding in reality is even more questionable.

The Witch could be said to be potentially empowering; a woman with special knowledge and even magical powers will have more freedom to act according to her own will even in the most patriarchal of societies, at least in theory. These powers can be simplified as those of communication, of reading the outside world and translating it for others: "Magic has often been linked to other expansive systems for understanding, interacting with, and influencing the whole of creation, namely, religion and science" (Bailey 2006: 2). Nonetheless, the Witch as we know her today was codified by men in positions of power – precisely in the fields of religion and science –, and turned into a scapegoat figure, benefiting from the unprivileged status of most women who were accused of witchcraft. In other words, it was not the so-called Witch the one to produce text and share her worldview with others.

Besides not comprehending any real power, the stereotype of the Witch is especially harmful because of its inherent sexism and classism. In his clarification of the meaning of *magic*, Bailey writes:

> Witchcraft is generally taken to mean harmful magic performed by people of low social status. It is typically not a learned craft involving long study or highly developed ritual expertise. It often carries the implication of close alliance with or worship of evil supernatural entities. Its practitioners are more often women than men. (2006: 19)

Because of their unprivileged position, practitioners of witchcraft would not be able to acquire knowledge as understood by the elites. Their counter-discourse, if real, might subvert the established social order and must therefore be considered evil. This is not an atemporal idea – its origins have been researched:

> The decades that preceded the breakup of Western Christendom are particularly important for understanding the history of European witchcraft theory. It was during these decades that the new notion of a conspiratorial and diabolic sect of witches was fully expounded and propagated in print across Europe. This was also the period in which the feminization of magic, which had been under way since the early fifteenth century, was completed. (2010: 53)

The Witch in her devil-worshipping facet includes a layer of rejection of female sexuality. From a misogynistic Early Modern point of view, their sin is not only of the mind – unsurprising, taking into account their female condition – but also of the body. Witches were heretics, yes, but in a different way: "The witches' heresy is manifested primarily through their deeds; that is, by engaging in sexual relations with demons and by causing physical damage harming God's creations" (60). To add insult to injury, women would not be leaders even in such female-coded communities, since "demonologists (…) continued to assume that men filled roles of leadership within the sect of diabolic witches, even as they began to emphasize women's inherent propensity to witchcraft" (64).

The contemporary, more positive image of the Witch can also be considered limiting by its stereotypical nature. The rhetoric of the 'true' witch that would have inhabited the pagan world is ultimately empty, and it is codified by late 20th century currents of thought. While this stereotype does not demonise or threaten women, it romanticises a very particular kind of woman and excludes the rest. Its idealised connection between women, wombs, motherhood, and a divine Mother Earth is essentialist and cissexist, and raises impossible standards. In her analysis of this revisionist image of witchcraft, Purkiss writes:

> She was us as we should have been; she was the perfect nurturing mother that we were not, the useful woman who cared nothing for orthodox power, but who had at her disposal awesome knowledge. Above all, she is free, free of church, state, men, and the unlawful wishes for power and money which they might wickedly inspire. (1996: 19)

This ideal is described as an "often unattainable fantasy" (21) which aims to both invent and restore a "lost tradition" (42), hiding conservative values behind seemingly subversive rhetoric: "This relentless repression of characteristics *traditionally considered* un-feminine in patriarchy – anger, hate, aggression, desire for sex or money

– is dispiriting" (48). Nevertheless, Purkiss allows that "when understood as an active subject, [the modern witch] seems much more liberated and liberating" (42). Even if witchcraft is seen as fictional, the figure of the modern witch is attractive. It allows women to approach a discourse that demonised them and to find power in it, exploring the ways in which that power can be used from the margins, even in communion with other witches.

In contemporary fiction, the trend seems to be to approach the witch as an individual – she has become more of a subject and less of a stereotype. Fantasy novels such as *The Mists of Avalon* (Marion Zimmer Bradley, 1983), *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* (Gregory Maguire, 1995), and *Bitter Greens* (Kate Forsyth, 2012); films like *Maleficent* (Walt Disney Pictures and Roth Films, 2014); television shows like *Once Upon a Time* (ABC, 2011-ongoing) all revisit and explore the motives and psychology of classic fairy tale or popular literature witches. Contemporary stories that create new witches do so from a complex, sympathetic point of view, in an endless parade of witches of all moral shades:

> Perhaps influenced by the modern witchcraft movement, evil witches have come to share the stage with more positively conceived figures (…) for whom magic is a benign and natural talent. This (…) means that 'witch' now signifies, not one familiar and identifiable type, but a broad field of semantic possibility that both writers and readers must learn to navigate. (Butler 2012: 226)

For Purkiss, however, these new witches risk being all too good to be interesting, and might fall into stereotypes once again:

> We have sanitised the witch, so that she can become acceptable, transforming her into another one of our better selves. Now she is clean, pretty, an herbalist with a promising career in midwifery, a feminist, as good a mother as anybody if not rather better than most, sexually liberated (without anything too kinky). (1996: 282)

Yet this subjugation of supposedly-free women to a new idealisation is not complete: "In what is most familiar, canny, even cosy, lies buried a trace of that which we now

find absolutely alien" (276). In other words, this growing, more human stereotype of the witch, which allows for some goodness, might still be threatening to social order.

The witches of *His Dark Materials* appear to be constructed from the revisionist approach to witchcraft. In Lyra's world, witches must necessarily be women; there is an essentialist link between magic and the biological female body. In fact, they hold their physical embodiment in the highest regard. Considering the ethereal angels, the witch queen Ruta Skadi "felt nothing but compassion (…) How much they must miss, never to feel the earth beneath their feet, or the wind in their hair, or the tingle of the starlight on their bare skin!" (Pullman 1997: 249) Their spells are articulated using the rhetoric of motherhood, such as; "Little knife, your mother calls you, / from the entrails of the earth, / from her deepest mines and caverns, / from her secret iron womb" (229).

The witches organise themselves in matriarchal clans, ruled by matrilineal dynasties, and hold councils; they are almost completely outside non-magical – and patriarchal – society, and have ambassadors; the only such figure that appears in the trilogy is a man. Their powers are those of long life, mobility – they can separate themselves from their daemons; they can fly; they are unaffected by meteorological conditions –, prophecy, and communication – "because [the witches] live so close to the place where the veil between the worlds is thin, they hear immortal whispers from time to time, in the voices of those beings who pass between the worlds" (Pullman 1995: 159).

On the other hand, the characters who belong to the oppressive structure of The Church regard the witches in an utterly negative manner, reading them as the older stereotype:

> Like the witches, daughters of evil! The Church should have put them all to death many years ago. Witches, have nothing to do with them (…) They will try to seduce you. They will use all the soft, cunning, deceitful ways they have, their flesh, their soft skin, their sweet voices, and they will take your seed, you know

> what I mean by that, they will drain you and leave you hollow! They will take your future, your children that are to come, and leave you nothing. (Pullman 2000: 86)

The witches themselves are horrified when they discover how they are treated in other worlds, like Will Parry's, which is the reader's: "How they capture witches, in some worlds, and burn them alive, sisters. Yes, witches like ourselves…" (Pullman 1997: 244).

Therefore, the author shows an awareness of the older and newer considerations of the stereotypical Witch; he does not seem to criticise the contemporary benevolent witch, but he exaggerates the idea of the older, devil-worshipping one to expose the ignorance and dogmatism of some characters. As was the case with the Mother, the aspects that make up the wicked stereotypical Witch are dismissed as false.

Serafina Pekkala is the queen of a witch clan and Lyra's protector. She is apparently ageless; it is eventually stated that she is over 300 years old, but Lyra thinks she appears "younger than Mrs. Coulter" (Pullman 1995: 274) – it is interesting that the two women are immediately compared, since they are Lyra's main female referents. Contrasting with Mrs. Coulter's dark hair and luxurious clothing, Serafina is "fair, with bright green eyes; and clad like all the witches in strips of black silk, but wearing no furs, no hood or mittens (…) Around her brow was a simple chain of little red flowers" (274). Therefore, she is visually linked to natural beauty, and seems unconcerned with worldly wealth. Serafina's noble nature is indirectly shown through her daemon, Kaisa – a goose, a domestic but also fierce and powerful animal. While Mrs. Coulter's daemon is silent, Kaisa talks to Lyra before Serafina even appears; the witch is introduced soul-first.

In her study of modern witchcraft, Diane Purkiss found that "the witchcraft revival, largely formulated by men, invented a fertility religion which depended on the notion of the Great Goddess who represented the biological stages of women's lives (maiden,

mother, crone) as prehistorical, uncivilised" (1996: 36). Serafina would fit this particular trait; witches live outside human civilisation, but they have their own, which is seen as alien and vaguely threatening by human institutions. Moreover, the three aspects of the Goddess all appear in her description. She is flower-crowned and "slender and graceful" (Pullman 2000: 424), yet wise and impossibly old. More importantly to our analysis, she has been a mother – she had a son decades before the narration starts, but he died before reaching adulthood. Her relationship with the father, another of Lyra's mentors, affected her deeply, and she says that she would have renounced her nature to settle into a conventional marriage:

> I would never have flown again – I would have given all that up in a moment, without a thought, to be a gyptian boat wife and cook for him and share his bed and bear his children. But you cannot change what you are, only what you do. (1995: 283-284)

It cannot be known whether she would fulfil the role of a stereotypical mother; eventually she returned to her clan to become their queen, as was her duty. Serafina might be invested in protecting Lyra, but it is said that "there are vast powers involved" in the girl's adventures, and she "must guard the interests of her clan" (Pullman 1995: 238). Therefore, unlike Mrs. Coulter, Serafina does not struggle for power – she simply inherits it, and is tempted to renounce it when it conflicts with her personal interests. She holds councils with her followers and forms alliances with other clans; she listens to contrary opinions and shares her authority without feeling threatened. This does not mean that Serafina is not violent; she uses a bow and arrows in battle, but the plot always justifies her actions, since their goal is to protect the innocent. When she finds a witch being tortured by Mrs. Coulter and her followers, she kills her. However, this action is described in positive terms. She appears to the victim as a goddess, "merry and lighthearted", and kisses her before killing her "gently" before she suffers more

(Pullman 1997:36). Mrs. Coulter is linked to the bloodiest aspects of witchcraft described in the previous section – Serafina, on the other hand, is a joyful witch.

Serafina speaks for all her clan when she says that "whatever they were doing at Bolvangar, we felt it was wrong with all our hearts. Lyra is their enemy; so we are her friends. We don't see more clearly than that" (Pullman 1995: 280). Nevertheless, she grows closer to Lyra and swears to protect her (1997: 43). It is never explicitly stated that this is because she has been a mother, but she constantly protects children (117). This personal involvement in human affairs, especially her closeness to Lyra, makes her wonder: "Was she becoming human? Was she losing her witchhood?" (43). Again, her role as a mother figure is shown to pull her from her nature as a witch.

All in all, Pullman's witches in general fit well the stereotype of the newer, close-to-nature good witch. Purkiss found a trace of something threatening in the modern witch, but this does not seem to be the case for Serafina in particular. The witches offer an alternative, non-patriarchal social structure, but it depends on powers unattainable for Lyra and the other humans. Serafina's authority is never questioned, and soon she does not seem too alien to the other characters. Unlike other witches, who act according to their own agendas, Serafina's motives are always explained and Lyra never doubts her allegiance – they understand each other. In other words, Serafina acts like the modern witch except when she acts like a mother.

V. Serafina Pekkala and Mrs. Coulter as Lyra's Contrasting Mentors

Lyra, as a young heroine, is in need of mentorship. She has biological parents, but they are mostly absent or actively harmful. Consequently, both her and Will Parry, her companion, "need the context and models of positive agency provided during their adventures; their inspiration to mature action has come from parental surrogates"

(Rutledge 2008: 122). These surrogates therefore not only protect the children, but inspire them with their example. More importantly, they seem aware of their role. As Mr. Scoresby the aeronaut tells Serafina; "that little girl has had bad luck with her true parents, and maybe I can make it up to her. Someone has to do it, and I'm willing" (Pullman 1997: 47). Providing nurture is seen as a responsibility regardless of gender and social position. In fact, it is "performed for the most part collectively by marginalized persons not generally associated with child-rearing" (Rutledge 2008: 126).

Nevertheless, this paper is concerned with the complexity of gender roles available to the characters. At the very beginning of the trilogy, Lyra is surrounded almost exclusively by men, and has interiorised deeply misogynistic views. When she meets Mrs. Coulter, she asks; "'Are you a female Scholar?' (…) She regarded female Scholars with a proper Jordan [College] disdain: there were such people, but, poor things, they could never be taken more seriously than animals dressed up and acting a play" (Pullman 1995: 30). Lyra learns from Mrs. Coulter that women can navigate the male-dominated world of academic and political institutions. Nevertheless, we have seen that Lyra does not feel comfortable with Mrs. Coulter's traditionally performed – almost enforced – femininity. As Rutledge argues:

> The models provided by Serafina Pekkala and Mary Malone counter the example of her mother's accommodating her goals to male-dominated power structures; because of her experiences with Serafina Pekkala and Mary Malone, Lyra can see that she need not replicate the career of Marisa Coulter. (…) Their presence provides a positive female agency that Lyra develops only slowly as the novels progress. (2008: 125-127)

It is not my goal to pitch Serafina and Mrs. Coulter against each other, but rather to insist on how their different examples open Lyra's view of femininity. Nevertheless, the text does present the two characters in constant opposition. Both are powerful women in their own spheres of influence, different from what Lyra knows, and thus it is natural that she uses one as a reference when meeting the other. The heroine takes an immediate

liking to her: "'That's clever of you,' [Lyra] said. '(…) I think you're probably cleverer than Mrs. Coulter" (Pullman 1995: 286). The narrator describes the witch as simply "the archer who'd saved Lyra from Mrs. Coulter" (274), and their relationship soon becomes warm and loving: "[Lyra] threw her arms around the witch and hugged her so tightly that the witch laughed out loud, and kissed the top of her head" (1997: 211), a gesture that would be unthinkable with Mrs. Coulter. When the story finishes, Serafina no longer sees herself as a guardian or parental figure to Lyra: "I will be her sister as long as she lives" (2000: 427). Their relationship, then, is dynamic and mutually rewarding, and becomes more equal as Lyra matures. Therefore, Serafina takes on the nurturing aspects of the stereotypical mother, but since she is *not*, she can move on once Lyra is mature and safe.

The two characters interact in the books; Serafina thinks that Mrs. Coulter looks "proud, passionate" and "so young" (Pullman 1997: 29). Nonetheless, she soon forms an utterly negative opinion of her, since when they meet Mrs. Coulter is torturing a witch: "As for that woman", she tells her ambassador, "I shall kill her, but still I'm afraid of her" (38). This hatred lasts until the last book; "[Serafina] wept with rage and fear and remorse: rage against the woman Coulter, whom she had sworn to kill…" (2000: 34).

As she grows and returns to her own world, Lyra decides to learn from the very same female Scholars she had mocked when she met Mrs. Coulter; she will go into the male-dominated field of academia, like her mother had done, but she will not use Mrs. Coulter's strategies, since achieving power is not her goal. Rather, her purpose is to learn to read the alethiometer, an instrument that shows the truth; this is closer to what she has seen in Serafina, whose community she cannot possibly join. The witch's skills, after all, are those of communication, used for the sake of protecting others – indeed,

conventional feminine skills, but applied to an untraditional field. Lyra will be limited by her society, but she has seen alternative ways of being a woman in her world. Throughout the trilogy the author makes a point of at the same time paying homage to and questioning tradition; Rutledge says that his "implied critique of parental failures stops short of a radical subversion of adult authority" (2008: 20). Consequently, Lyra reconsiders her previous worldview thanks to her different role models.

Conclusions

Considering Serafina Pekkala and Mrs. Coulter on their own and in comparison with each other, it seems that they subvert stereotypical images of women – to an extent. Their archetypical nature ought not to be criticized, since it does not have a negative impact on the representation of female characters by itself. The two characters are conventional for their genre – that of children's fantasy literature – but can be read as subversive from a Gender Studies perspective.

The more traditional aspects of the stereotypical Mother – self-sacrificing devotion to her children and passing on of traditional femininity – are dismissed as false or harmful with the character of Mrs. Coulter, who follows her own goals to the extent of hurting others and whose teachings are rejected by her daughter, but still leave a mark. She is presented as a complex, ambiguous being, not as a flat caricature of female wickedness. The stereotype of the Witch, on the other hand, has two versions. The first is deeply misogynistic and demonises women of the margins, while the second and more modern one creates a limiting, unattainable idealisation of "female nature". In *His Dark Materials*, the first stereotype is criticized as reactionary, a tool in the hands of tyrannical institutions. Nonetheless, the author fails to subvert the second one; Serafina is an almost perfect example of the stereotypical contemporary benevolent witch;

limiting and conservative, but less harmful and open to empowering readings. However, its unattainability for human women, even those who have “witch-oil” in their souls, is remarked.

The two characters are women in positions of power, which makes them examples for Lyra – who so far has only seen men in authority. Mrs. Coulter lives in a patriarchal society, but she creates her own power structure so that she can achieve her goals. Serafina introduces a completely different society, with its own rules. Lyra rejects her mother’s strategy and cannot follow Serafina’s, but she learns from them and decides to pursue knowledge and the truth in her own way. Consequently, both women open up Lyra’s – and the reader’s – view of paths for women and, by their traits and actions, bring them to challenge literary and social tradition.

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